

THE COMMUNISM OF THOMAS SAY

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In the various biographical accounts of Thomas Say, and particularly in those appearing in scientific journals, little is said of his communistic life at New Harmony. Ord, in his memoir of Say, speaks disapprovingly and ironically of the labors of Owen and Maclure in their Indiana settlement, "where the sum of human happiness, it was believed, would be exalted; and where science and letters, it was confidently affirmed, would soon arise, like the orient sun, to enlighten our benighted western world."¹ Ord's account, however, was written shortly after the failure of Owen's "social system" and without the perspective of time, for out of Owen's and Maclure's utopian endeavors certain successful social movements can be traced.

We are not here concerned with Say's scientific attainments, which are well known and fully recognized, but rather with the motives which may have induced him to go to New Harmony, and with his life while there.

New Harmony, located on the Wabash River, in Indiana, was settled in 1815 by George Rapp and his disciples. Previous to this time, or in 1803, Rapp and a few followers came to the United States from Germany in search of religious freedom, and purchased a piece of land near Zehenople, Pennsylvania. A year later, three boatloads of his followers came over, of which six hundred settled with Rapp, and the remainder, or about one-third, founded another settlement in Lycoming County under a Mr. Haller. In 1805 a "community of equality" was established, and Rapp's followers agreed to live and dress simply, to give their possessions to the community for the common good, and to work for the community at large. Later they renounced marriage and tobacco.

The industry and unity of the Rappites soon developed a remarkable prosperity. Two thousand acres of cultivated land

¹ George Ord, in "A Memoir of Thomas Say," 1834.

were producing exceptional yields, and woollen and other factories were established. Realizing, however, the limitations of their location, twelve miles distant from navigation, and also the inadaptability of their land for fruit culture, they sold their Pennsylvania property and purchased a large tract of land in Indiana, where they founded the village of "Harmonie." Here, too, the thrifty Germans flourished under the able leadership of Father Rapp, and their membership increased. For reasons which do not seem quite clear at this time, they again sold out in 1824, this time to Mr. Robert Owen, and moved to a place eighteen miles below Pittsburgh, on the Ohio River, where they built a village and named it "Economy." This is the "Rapp's Economy" where Professor B. Jaeger, as set forth in his "North American Insects" (1854, page 199), "was happy to be able to purchase some fine silk handkerchiefs, which were manufactured there out of silk of their own raising."

Leaving the Rappites at Economy, we come to the activities of Robert Owen, an English social reformer and cotton manufacturer who labored to relieve the terrible conditions of factory workers during the Industrial Revolution, by improved housing, the establishment of schools, sickness and old-age insurance, recreation centers, etc., thereby earning for himself the enmity of his business associates. He was opposed to child labor and worked hard to secure the passage of reform legislation. However, a public declaration of his religious beliefs did much to destroy his popularity and plans, and in 1819, when he stood for Parliament in Lanark borough, labor leaders, factory owners, and even the laboring people who had been the objects of his altruism for many years, combined to defeat him.

When Richard Flower, who had been commissioned by Father Rapp to sell the Harmonist holdings, visited England, he found Robert Owen in a favorable frame of mind toward its purchase. In December, 1824, Mr. Owen visited the United States, and in the spring of 1825 he became "the owner of an estate consisting of nearly thirty thousand acres of land—three thousand under cultivation by the Harmonists, nineteen detached farms, six hundred acres of improved land occupied by tenants, some fine orchards, eighteen acres of bearing vines, and the village of Har-

monie, with its great church, its brick, frame and log houses, and its factories, with almost all the machinery."² Everything was in readiness for the founding of his ideal community.

Mr. Owen hoped to reform society by establishing cooperation, brotherly love, and universal education, and through the absence of competition and of religious motives. All possessions were to be held in common by the people; everyone was to have equal advantages and freedom; middlemen were to be abolished and direct distribution from producer to consumer effected; the truth was to be taught and people were to be liberated from their superstitions; schools and asylums were to be built; women were to have equal rights with men; labor was to be made pleasant and attractive; gold and silver as media of exchange were to be replaced by a medium which would fluctuate correlatively with changes in the value of materials; the family was to be replaced by associations of from 500 to 2,000 people, and the associations united in tens, hundreds, etc.; community government was to be by a general council to which all members between the ages of thirty and forty belonged, and various departments were to be run by committees.

As for religion, Robert Owen said that a Supreme Power was the cause of all existence. In his own words, "The practice of the rational religion will consist in promoting, to the utmost of our power, the happiness and well being of every man, woman and child, without regard to their sect, class, party or color, and its worship, in those inexpressible feelings of wonder, admiration and delight, which, when man is surrounded by superior circumstances only, will naturally arise from the contemplation of the infinity of space, of the eternity of duration, of the order of the universe, and of that Incomprehensible Power, by which the atom is moved, and the aggregate of nature is governed."

During February and March, 1825, Robert Owen explained his ideas and plans to large and distinguished audiences in the Hall of Representatives at Washington, and a little later public announcement was made of the opening of the colony and invitations to membership were extended to all who were in sympathy with the undertaking. This proclamation was so successful that

² George B. Lockwood. *The New Harmony Communities*, 1902, p. 75.

“New Harmony became the rendezvous of enlightened and progressive people from all over the United States and northern Europe. On the other hand, there came to New Harmony scores of cranks with curious hobbies, many persons impelled by curiosity and many others attracted by the prospect of life without labor. The heterogeneous mass would have afforded Charles Dickens an unlimited supply of character studies, for eccentricity ran riot in a hundred directions. The large majority were free-thinkers, attracted by Robert Owen’s unorthodox religious views.”³

On May 1, 1825, the “Preliminary Society of New Harmony,” was formed and a constitution adopted. The purpose of this preliminary organization was to “improve the character and conditions of its own members and to prepare them to become associates in independent communities, having common property.” Owen realized the necessity of educating and training the new members before his ideal community could be attained, and so he enlisted the support of William Maclure, wealthy Philadelphia geologist and principal founder of the Philadelphia Academy of Natural Sciences, who had excellent ideas on education but hazy ones on political economy. Maclure, who invested \$150,000 in the scheme but limited his liability to \$10,000, believed that he could make New Harmony the center of education in America. Between them, they collected and brought to New Harmony on January 18, 1826, such celebrities as Thomas Say, Charles Alexander Lesueur, artist and naturalist; Constantine Samuel Rafinesque, teacher of natural history, botanist and author; Dr. Gerard Troost, a Holland geologist; John Chappelsmith, artist and engraver; Professor Joseph Neef, a Pestalozzian educator; Robert Owen’s four sons, trained for teaching and chemistry, besides others of lesser fame.

It would be interesting to follow the history of the undertaking in some detail, but as this is supposed to be an article about Thomas Say it will suffice to state that dissension arose, new communities were formed by original members who were not in sympathy with Owen’s liberal religious views, the workers tired of supporting the idlers, jealousies flourished, Owen’s philosophy

³ Lockwood, *l.c.*, p. 103.

was criticized, lazy members were ousted, Maclure and Owen quarreled over property, the law was invoked to settle their dispute, Owen returned to England, and Maclure went to Mexico. In a short time the disorganization was complete.

It is difficult to determine definitely the extent of Thomas Say's interest in Owen's scheme for the betterment of humanity. Before going to New Harmony Say had been associated with Maclure during the early days of the Philadelphia Academy of Natural Sciences, and in 1818 he, Peale, Ord and Maclure visited the coasts of Georgia and eastern Florida for the purpose of studying natural history. Although his early years, and later ones too for that matter, were not crowned with financial success, and although his failure in the drug business, followed as it was by the necessity of living in the rooms of the society and doing his own housework and cooking, resulted in a condition bordering on poverty, yet these experiences, while perhaps tending to make Say sympathetic with unfortunate humanity, were totally unlike those of Owen, who was familiar with the squalor, wretchedness and extreme poverty of factory workers in English towns.

However, Say was always at the service of others and of such an amiable and trusting nature that he may have readily absorbed the impassioned accounts of Owen and Maclure of the good life to be led at New Harmony. His biographers have described his personality in such terms as "bland," "conciliatory," "modest," "diffident," "retiring," etc., leading one to assume that he perhaps did not hold definite or intense opinions upon many subjects. Although he may have been reticent in expressing his views, the fact that he had them and could become indignant upon occasion is indicated by his statement in a letter to John F. Melsheimer in 1818 about his Florida trip, wherein he speaks of the "most cruel & inhuman war that our government is unrighteously & unconstitutionally waging against these poor wretches whom we call savages."⁴

Again, he may have been more interested in Maclure's educational program for New Harmony and the opportunities for research work which were to be afforded, than in Owen's economics. Maclure was his friend and patron, and Say's strong sense of

⁴ Ent. News, Vol. XII, p. 235, 1901.

duty may have outweighed any doubts as to the outcome of the venture. During the six or seven years previous to 1825, when he went to New Harmony, his time was occupied with expeditions and teaching, neither of them very remunerative, and he was unmarried and in poor health. Perhaps New Harmony appeared to him as a utopia, an opportunity to escape from illness and teaching to a life of scientific work with agreeable associates, interrupted only by the necessity of supplying his modest wants. Perhaps his dependence upon Maclure's patronage was such as to exclude the possibility of refusing to go. Whatever his motives may have been, he made the trip and was part of the "Boat Load of Knowledge" that descended upon New Harmony in the middle of January, 1826. It is apparent, even from the meager accounts accessible to us, that once there Say entered fully into the spirit of Owen's and Maclure's plans.

The Duke of Saxe-Weimar, who visited New Harmony in 1826, recorded his impression of Say as follows: "I renewed acquaintance here with Mr. Say, a distinguished naturalist from Philadelphia, to whom I had been introduced there, but unfortunately he had found himself embarrassed in his fortune, and was obliged to come here as a friend of Mr. Maclure. The gentleman appeared quite comical in the costume of the society, with his hands covered with hard lumps and blisters, occasioned by the unusual labor he was obliged to undertake in the garden."

It is conceivable also that Say took part in the social life of the community, at least that part of it involving his immediate friends. Miss Lucy Sistare, who became Mrs. Say, was one of the belles of the place and fond of dancing, and it is not unlikely that Say, in spite of his bashfulness, found it expedient to please her. As to the living, the Duke said, "Upon the whole, I cannot complain either of an overloaded stomach, or a headache from the wine. The living was frugal in the strictest sense." Ord infers that both Maclure and Say carried their abstinence from food too far, in view of the fact that each lived for a considerable time on six cents a day.

When the "permanent" community was formed, Mr. Say was elected by the parent community as superintendent of literature, science and education, a comprehensive title. If Ord's account

is true, Say was poorly fitted to superintend either literature or education. Say received his early training in the Friends' Academy of West-town, Pennsylvania, where he acquired a "distaste for letters" and classical literature. These he did not miss until later in life, and then his passion for making discoveries occupied his attention to the exclusion of everything else. Maclure, too, was not partial to belles-lettres. He considered literature as an "ornamental" branch of study as opposed to the "useful" sciences. He believed that "a plain, simple narrative of facts, got by evidence of the senses," was "all the literature that ninety-nine one-hundredths of mankind have occasion for." Such was the treatment of belles-lettres at the hands of a geologist and entomologist in New Harmony.

While at New Harmony, Say had an opportunity to introduce reforms into entomological nomenclature, but he failed to utilize it. One of his fellow superintendents, Stedman Whitwell, worried by the number of "Washingtons" and "Springfields" that were appearing in every state, proposed a system of nomenclature by which a locality could be given a distinctive name that would indicate at once the latitude and longitude of the place, thereby enabling one to locate it geographically. Whitwell's scheme involved the use of letters as shown below as substitutes for the figures expressing latitude and longitude.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	0
Latitude	a	e	i	o	u	y	ee	ei	ie	ou
Longitude	b	d	f	k	l	m	n	p	r	t

The latitude was to be indicated by the first part of the town name and the longitude by the second part, by substituting letters for the figures in the above table. "S" in the latitude name indicated that it was south latitude, and its absence denoted north latitude. "V" denoted west longitude, and its absence east longitude. By this method, New Harmony, 38°, 11', N; 87°, 55', W, became Ipba Veinul; New York, Otke Notive; Pittsburgh, Otfu Veitoup, and Washington, Feili Neivul. According to Lockwood,

“the principal argument in favor of the new system presented by the author was that the name of a neighboring Indian chief, ‘Occoneocoglecocachecachecodungo,’ was even worse than some of the effects produced by this ‘rational system’ of nomenclature.” Elaborate rules for the pronunciation of the compound names were formulated by Whitwell.

After the failure of Owen’s social system and Maclure’s Educational Society, Maclure stayed at New Harmony and continued his experiments in education, running a seminary for both sexes. In 1828 he went to Mexico for his health, leaving his interests in Say’s charge. With no other means of support, Say was compelled to remain at New Harmony, which he did until his death in 1834. However, New Harmony was a focus for scientists for many years after its failure as a “community” and here Say did much of his work on the “American Conchology” and his third volume of “American Entomology.”

Although the New Harmony communities, wrecked as they were by the human factors of stupidity, greed, jealousy, cussedness and arrogance, were laid out by Owen along carefully planned economic lines, they did not after all constitute the kind of Utopia that most of us look forward to without any hope of attaining. They were too practical, too much like the real world, and too much like poor colonies. Say’s communism, if it can be so called, was apparently incidental to the rest of his life, and of his own private Utopia we know nothing.

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